Historicizing the Postmodern Allegory

Zhang Longxi

> Where man is drawn towards the symbol, allegory emerges from the depths of being to intercept the intention, and to triumph over it.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*

In contemporary discussions of art, literature, and culture, there is evidently a tendency to question the efficacy of language, meaning, expression, and communication, and the questioning of such basic notions in human life and human sciences may be said to constitute the central theoretical project in the discourse of postmodernism. Although the impossibility of a fixed and clear meaning, the slippage of the signifier from the signified, and the figurality of language that cuts across the entire process of verbal expression are not really new themes in philosophical reflections on the negativity of language, they do form a major proposition of postmodernist theory, which at the same time tells the story of a radical break from traditional culture, a metanarrative about the decline of classical metanarratives of legitimation, or the breakdown of the Western humanist heritage. Fredric Jameson, who has written extensively on postmodernism, often speaks of it as a cultural break. In Jameson's reading, the Lacanian conception of schizophrenia as "a breakdown in the signifying chain" becomes a precise simulacrum of this postmodern condition, a linguistic-psychoanalytic interpretation of the cultural break that characterizes the contemporary, postmodern and poststructuralist, cultural scene. "When that relationship breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap," says Jameson, "then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers."[1] The schizophrenic psyche and the disconnected signifier provide fitting metaphors for describing what is often referred to in contemporary theory as the "death" of the subject, the alleged disappearance of the individual subject or the fragmentation of the "decentered" psyche in the "overdeveloped" and highly alienating society of the contemporary West. The postmodern break is thus both psycholog-

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ical and social, as the failure of language affects the personal as well as the communal in breaking up the links in the chain of signification. E. Ann Kaplan also speaks of the postmodern as "representing a cultural 'break' in the sense of Foucault's 'episteme,' or Kuhn's paradigms: the postmodern moment is a break initiated by modernism, which is here viewed as a transitional period between nineteenth-century Romanticism and the current cultural scene."[2] Indeed, break and breakdown seem to be the appropriate words for describing the postmodern condition, a condition of fragmentation, of fundamental discontinuity in culture and in history.

In the rhetoric of postmodernism, this radical break is often hypostatized by a revival of allegory, and the concept of allegory is typically described in the language of cacophony and disruption. According to Jameson, this revival or reinvention of allegory is significant and symptomatic of the present cultural and theoretical moment because it reveals "a generalized sensitivity, in our own time, to breaks and discontinuities, to the heterogeneous (not merely in works of art), to Difference rather than Identity, to gaps and holes rather than seamless webs and triumphant narrative progressions, to social differentiation rather than to Society as such and its 'totality,' in which older doctrines of the monumental work and the 'concrete universal' bathed and reflected themselves."[3] Since allegory has traditionally been understood as a discourse that exists not in and of itself but to reveal a higher order of things, an order not directly present in the text of the allegory itself, there has always been in allegory a self-conscious recognition of the impossibility of direct presentation, but only an indirect re-presentation, of something other than what the text literally says. The meaning of allegory exists, as it were, on the other side of the signification, and so there is always the sense of a gap between the sign and the meaning it signifies, the sense of the need for an act of deciphering and uncovering. And it is this sense of gaps and discontinuities, this self-consciousness of the need for interpretation, that has made allegory the favorite trope in postmodern criticism.

Given the assumption of a cultural break, however, the postmodern revival of allegory with its emphasis on the break and discontinuity is at once fascinating and puzzling because it is not at all clear how one can relate the postmodern allegory with allegory, as it has been traditionally defined or understood, in a way that makes the word "revival" intelligible. In the language of contemporary criticism, at least for some critics, allegory is not just any rhetorical device or trope. Joel Fineman argues that both psychoanalysis and allegory are ways to thematize the dream to know, the desire to interpret, and therefore both offer the same prevailing paradigm for critical inquiry as a pursuit of the deep structure

underneath surface manifestations. "Thus generalized," says Fineman, "allegory rapidly acquires the status of trope of tropes, representative of the figurality of all language, the distance between signifier and signified, and, correlatively, the response to allegory becomes representative of critical activity per se."[4] In other words, almost all literature and criticism can be redefined as allegory and allegoresis. The works of Walter Benjamin and especially Paul de Man have given a powerful articulation as well as a propelling to the renewed interest in allegory that, now as the trope of tropes, is seen to disclose an inherently structural problem of all language. "Allegory," says Benjamin in providing a much expanded definition of the term, "is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is."[5] As a form of expression with an innate double bind of tenor and vehicle, allegory dramatizes the problematic relation between meaning and expression, and it reveals the dissonance of all verbal forms, speech as well as writing, and thereby unfolds the figural nature of language itself. For de Man, allegory is completely grounded in figures or a system of figures; it names the condition of all language, the deconstructive notion of all textuality. "The paradigm for all texts consists of a figure (or a system of figures) and its deconstruction," de Man declares in his characteristically authoritative manner when drawing this general conclusion from his reading of Rousseau:

> But since this model cannot be closed off by a final reading, it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition which narrates the unreadability of the prior narration. As distinguished from primary deconstructive narratives centered on figures and ultimately always on metaphor, we can call such narratives to the second (or the third) degree *allegories*. Allegorical narratives tell the story of the failure to read whereas tropological narratives, such as the *Second Discourse*, tell the story of the failure to denominate. The difference is only a difference of degree and the allegory does not erase the figure. Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading—a sentence in which the genitive "of" has itself to be "read" as a metaphor.[6]

In providing a gloss to this difficult passage, J. Hillis Miller emphasizes the truth value of de Man's assertion. Admittedly the "confident absolutist tone" of that assertion may lead a skeptic reader to doubt, but Miller assures us that de Man is simply telling the truth about all texts and all linguistic expressions. Since all language is made up of figures and since all figures are always unstable, texts deconstruct themselves

even before the figurality of language is brought to the foreground in a deconstructive reading. "Deconstruction," thus Miller concludes, "as the reader can see from de Man's formulation, is not something the critic does to the text from the outside in the act of 'reading' it, but something all texts inevitably do to themselves. It is a built-in fatality of language that any text must not only posit a figure or system of figures but must at the same time dismantle it, bring its aberrancy into the open."[7] As the term employed to name the self-deconstructive textuality, allegory then becomes synonymous with language itself or its use: it is not something imposed on language but something that just happens whenever language is used. "It just happens," says Miller, "by a linguistic or narrative necessity. Just go on talking or writing and you will be sure to narrate allegorically the impossibility of reading your prior narration."[8] Allegory thus tells the only truth that any language is capable of telling, namely, the negative truth of its unreadability: "This intratextual unreadability is what all texts are 'really about,' the story they all really tell."[9] The compelling sense of truth or truth claim in de Man's formulation is thus reaffirmed in Miller's exegesis.

Allegory in this broad sense obviously dwells beyond the realm of human will and choice: it is not something a speaker or writer can choose to do or not to do with words, but something that inevitably happens in a linguistic context, something determined, as Paul Bové puts it, by "the impersonal, often 'inhuman' nature of language at the level of the conditions for the production of meaning and value."[10] Since language as a body of words and a system of grammatical rules, or as a social institution, is not controlled by any individual but rather controls the ways in which individual human beings express themselves, the postmodern allegory as embodiment of this impersonal nature of linguistic necessity evidently differs from the traditional concept of allegory as a rhetorical trope, a controlled linguistic construct. The austere recognition of the "inhuman" nature of language may be said to characterize de Man's rigorous style, but Bové describes that "inhuman" nature not dispassionately but ironically, not to endorse de Man's deconstructive pronouncement but to protest an ephebe's mechanical repetition of de Manian themes without in any way connecting them to history and social experience. Nevertheless, de Man has already said as much when he remarks, apparently with no irony intended in his last public lecture given a few months before his death, that language as a historical given and social institution is probably not a human invention, and that as such it determines the ways in which individual human beings use language rather than being determined by individuals who use language to communicate and produce meaning, which is of course the ordinary commonsense picture that we are accustomed to see and believe in.

"The way in which I can try to mean," says de Man, "is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not only [not] made by me, because I depend on the language as it exists for the devices which I will be using, it is as such not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all."[11] In this context, then, we should perhaps understand allegory as the name for the omnipresence of figures and their deconstruction in language as an impersonal institution. By evoking Roman Jakobson's mapping of all linguistic functions on the two axes of metaphor and metonymy and by arguing that allegory "would cut across and subtend all such stylistic categorizations," Fineman makes allegory just such a name for the structure of language. Thus he writes:

> No other figure so readily lays itself out on the grid constructed out of the hypothesized intersection of paradigmatic synchrony and syntagmatic diachrony, which is to say that no other figure so immediately instances the definition of linguistic structure that was developed by Jakobson out of Saussure and the Russian formalists, and that has since been applied to all the so-called sciences of man, from anthropology (Lévi-Strauss) to semiotics (Barthes) to psychoanalysis (Lacan).[12]

The revival of allegory is here presented as clearly an outcome of modern linguistic and literary theories since the advent of structuralism. In discussing de Man's notion of allegory, Craig Owens also claims that "allegory can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work."[13] Such claims to universal validity based on the impersonal and functional nature of language have made allegory not just one trope among many but the trope of tropes, the very figure of the figurality of language. Long before this, the reading of language, the act of understanding and interpretation, has already been universalized by Northrop Frye in his notion of criticism as allegoresis, his statement that "all commentary is allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery."[14] There is a caveat, however, because the allegorical, either as a structure of composition or a strategy of interpretation, tends to dissolve and disappear in this universalizing of allegory: when the allegorical is theorized to become a general and all-encompassing category, it ceases to designate anything in particular as an identifiable specific category.

If the postmodern concept of allegory makes a claim to universality and precipitates such a revival, the very notion of revival or rehabilitation must be understood as only a metaphor in that it does not really recuperate allegory from a remote cultural past. In its emphasis on break

and discontinuity, postmodernism is not particularly congenial to the value of past history. The postmodern society, as Jameson describes it, is "a society bereft of all historicity, one whose own putative past is little more than a set of dusty spectacles. In faithful conformity to poststructuralist linguistic theory, the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts." The concern for the past that is implicit in the notion of a revival, the concept of a postmodern "historicism," may thus turn out to be an instance of the postmodern pastiche, the relentless "cannibalization" of history, the "cannibalization of all the styles of the past."[15] If this is so, then we can detect two incompatible impulses or notions, of which one would define allegory as naming the figural nature of all language in all circumstances and thus equally applicable to the past as well as the present, while the other would emphasize the cultural break from the past, a radical break out of which the postmodern allegory is born as a new creature that renders all other allegories in the past irrelevant and obsolete. In the violent schism and dissonance of its language, the postmodern allegory claims to reveal the nature of all language, and yet it provides at the same time a simulacrum for the cultural break that speaks specifically of the contemporary Western society. Contrary to one another as they are, these two impulses nonetheless come together in making allegory no longer definable as a particular figure and incompatible with allegory as understood in traditional rhetoric, for the emphasis on the uniqueness of the new postmodern allegory denies any historical comparison, whereas the universality of allegory as synonymous with language itself makes comparison equally pointless. Allegory as a particular rhetorical device tends to dissolve completely in the universal applicability of its name: when everything becomes allegorical, nothing is properly allegorical. Under such conditions, it is difficult and indeed impossible to talk about allegory as a particular strategy or phenomenon with its own history and historicity. That is to say, if we want to look into allegory and allegoresis as textual and interpretive strategies motivated in certain social and historical conditions and created by writers and interpreters in response to those conditions, we shall find, probably to our disappointment, the postmodern allegory of little use as it names the universal figurality of language as an impersonal institution regardless of human, that is, social and historical, concerns.

Nevertheless, some critics have tried to put the postmodern revival of allegory precisely in a historical perspective. Taking historicizing as a sort of critical mandate, Jameson observes that allegory as a postmodern notion is "demanded and mobilized by the periodizing schema of the modernism/postmodernism break as such. Here again, then, as so often, postmodernism theory is itself an example of what it claims to anatomize:

the newer allegorical structures are postmodern and cannot be articulated without the allegory of postmodernism itself."[16] In other words, to talk about postmodern allegory as such already means to have presumed certain ground rules or propositions about language and culture as expounded in postmodernist theory, which allegory has been evoked to name and designate in the first place. This should alert us of the often self-serving and casuistic nature of the postmodern rhetoric, which confines our discussion of allegory within the circle it has drawn as soon as the ground rules of postmodernist theory are accepted. But if allegory and postmodernist theory form part of the same hermeneutic circle, it then becomes all the more important to historicize allegory not so much to get out of the circle as to see the very circularity as a problem that needs to be worked out in a theoretical study. To think historically of the postmodern thus entails a historical examination of allegory as the very sign of the postmodern break as such.

Perhaps the most obvious way to put the postmodern revival of allegory in a historical perspective is to see it as part of the general change and modification of critical discourse in modern time, especially as an oppositional gesture vis-à-vis the much privileged symbol in romantic literature and criticism. Jameson relates the rise of allegory with "the crisis of the older aesthetic absolute of the Symbol, as its formal and linguistic values secured their hegemony in the long period from romanticism to New Criticism and the canonization of 'modernist' works in the university system in the late 1950s."[17] This is precisely how Bové reads de Man's "Rhetoric of Temporality" when he highlights some "oppositional and even historical movements in the essay," and he argues that those movements reveal de Man's search for authority against the leading critics of romanticism, M. H. Abrams and Earl Wasserman in particular, and that they embody de Man's fight against "the ideological, intellectual, and academic dominance of the discourse of the symbol," his "ongoing struggle with Hegel and the institutionalization of his thought, his philosophy, his figures."[18] According to Bové, de Man's polemical writing is "above all a critique of the nineteenth century's forgetting of the tense relation between symbol and allegory in Goethe, Coleridge, and others. It is, if you will, as much a critique of the Professors as it is a critique of an inhuman linguistic structure."[19] In his book on de Man, Christopher Norris also describes de Man's major theoretical concerns as heading toward a critique of romantic ideology, especially of the manifestations of that ideology in Kant and Hegel as "a series of persistent contradictions, aporias, or antinomies which characterize the discourse of Romanticism and continue to vex modern thought in its attempts to make terms with that problematic heritage."[20] According to Norris, Hegel is the philosopher of the symbol, for whom

"the symbolic is the highest form of art, the most advanced stage that aesthetic consciousness can reach in its striving for a realm of unified knowledge and perception beyond the antinomies of alienated spirit."[21] Whether this is an accurate representation of Hegel's position in the *Aesthetics* is a question to which we shall later return, but in putting de Man's preference for allegory in the context of a struggle against the privilege of the symbol and the authority of romantic aesthetics, Norris certainly makes de Man's notion of allegory more intelligible than simply an odd and idiosyncratic word deployed to give language or textuality a different name.

"The Rhetoric of Temporality" is perhaps de Man's best-known essay on the subject of allegory and one of the most discussed of his writings. It is quite clear that the two parts of the essay, of which the first deals with allegory and symbol and the second with irony, attempt to differentiate these critical terms by way of a historical survey that, while examining some major arguments in German, French, and English romanticism, presents de Man's counterargument that deconstructs the basic tenets of romantic aesthetics and eventually makes allegory the triumphant figure over symbol. From the late eighteenth century on, de Man observes, one of the central concerns in the discourse of romanticism is the relationship between the mind and nature. According to some of the leading critics of romanticism, this relationship was conceived in the eighteenth century as a relation between the subject and the object, of which the key concept was that of "analogy," and it was then increasingly internalized in the nineteenth century to become a relation between subjects or that of the subject toward itself, of which terms like "affinity" or "sympathy" seemed to be more appropriate expressions than the formal and more abstract "analogy." "Thus the priority has passed," de Man observes, "from the outside world entirely within the subject, and we end up with something that resembles a radical idealism."[22] This familiar picture of romanticism as radical internalization of the relationship between the mind and nature is precisely what de Man sets out to deconstruct. Through a rhetorical reading of the symbolic diction and imagery in the works of Coleridge and especially of Wordsworth and Rousseau, de Man tries to show that these major romantic writers as well as their modern interpreters are all trapped in the temporality of the human self in front of an eternal nature in motion and are forced into a persistent contradiction. On the one hand, they are obliged, by their organic conception of language, to acknowledge the priority of nature and to emphasize the importance of descriptions of landscape and nature scenery that supposedly already contain patterns for human experience, thought, and feeling, while, on the other, they insist on an equally absolute priority of the self over nature, the view

that all descriptions of nature in romantic literature originate from the desire to give expression to a subjective mood or emotion and therefore are created as intimations of human feelings or projections of the human mind onto the outside world.

In Rousseau's novel *La nouvelle Héloïse,* which is often taken to be a supreme example of romantic literature, the garden Julie created on the Wolmar estate seems to represent the romantic notion of nature at its most complex. Instead of taking it as a symbol of Julie's virtue and emotions, de Man reads the garden scene as a certain repetition of the traditional allegorical topos by pointing out Rousseau's allusions to the medieval poem *Roman de la rose* and to Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe,* both of which are read as allegorical works. In such a reading, Julie's garden does not record an objective observation of real nature nor does it embody a subjective mood or feeling. "Far from being an observed scene or the expression of a personal *état d'âme,*" says de Man, "it is clear that Rousseau has deliberately taken all the details of his setting from the medieval literary source, one of the best-known versions of the traditional *topos* of the erotic garden."[23] Not only are allegorical elements present in Rousseau's text, but the conflict between the allegorical and the symbolic, according to de Man, "is ultimately resolved in the triumph of a controlled and lucid renunciation of the values associated with a cult of the moment, and this renunciation establishes the priority of an allegorical over a symbolic diction."[24] Likewise in Wordsworth, de Man goes on to argue, the natural scene described is not a specific locale observed in nature but a cluster of images to be read, like poems from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in terms of "a traditional and inherited typology."[25] The emphasis on the use of traditional allegorical topos in romantic literature obviously aims at a total subversion of such romantic notions as originality and spontaneity, and once de Man's reading dismantles the centrality of the relationship between the mind and nature or the subject and the object in romantic literary texts, it inevitably leads to a radical revision of the traditional view of romanticism as either naturalism or idealism, and also a radical revision of the elevation of symbol over allegory in romantic literary theory.

The symbol is understood in romantic aesthetics as capable of achieving the unity of form and substance because, as de Man says in summarizing the romantic argument, "the substance and its representation do not differ in their being but only in their extension: they are part and whole of the same set of categories. Their relationship is one of simultaneity, which, in truth, is spatial in kind, and in which the intervention of time is merely a matter of contingency, whereas in the world of allegory, time is the originary constitutive category."[26] Symbol and allegory are thus polarized as unity and dissonance, as eternity and mutability, as

spatial extension of the same set of categories and temporal sequence of distinct categories marked by difference, change, and death. The language of the symbol, unlike that of the discontinuous allegory, is allegedly capable of overcoming the gaps between the subject and the object, capable of bringing about, as Coleridge claims, "the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal."[27] For de Man, however, the claim to translucence or transcendence is nothing more than a romantic fantasy and mystification, utterly impossible for language to accomplish; moreover, the emphasis on translucence makes the richness of the material form insignificant and turns the symbol into a transparent vehicle like allegory for representing a transcendental meaning beyond the world of matter. In reading that passage from Coleridge, de Man observes, we start out from "the assumed superiority of the symbol in terms of organic substantiality," but we "end up with a description of figural language as translucence, a description in which the distinction between allegory and symbol has become of secondary importance."[28] While the symbol claims to overcome ontological gaps by way of spatial metaphors, the allegory is always related to "the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny."[29] It is de Man's conviction, says Norris, that language is "radically incapable" of transcendence and that "allegory is the more 'authentic' mode in so far as it accepts and perpetually rehearses the fact of this negative knowledge."[30] That is to say, de Man has undertaken to correct the romantic mystification by accepting the existential truth of temporality, by rigorously asserting the impossibility of language to coincide with empiric reality, or the impossibility of representation. The relation between sign and meaning is a matter of arbitrary linguistic structuring, which is deceptively concealed in the illusion of identification in the symbol but is honestly disclosed by the dissonance of the allegory. The allegorical sign, says de Man, can only "refer to another sign that precedes it. The meaning constituted by the allegorical sign can then consist only in the *repetition* (in the Kierkegaardian sense of the term) of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is of the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority."[31]

This last statement contains a number of important points: first, that a sign does not refer to anything outside the linguistic system but only to another sign that precedes it, which deconstructs the usual commonsense notions of reference, mimesis, or representation; and second, that the relationship between signs, the repetition of one sign of another, is not coincidence but modification, that is to say, it is always a break, a discontinuous continuity. It is precisely on the grounds of such an overt acknowledgment of discontinuity that de Man prefers allegory to symbol:

"Whereas the symbol postulates the possibility of an identity or identification, allegory designates primarily a distance in relation to its own origin, and, renouncing the nostalgia and the desire to coincide, it establishes its language in the void of this temporal difference. In so doing, it prevents the self from an illusory identification with the non-self, which is now fully, though painfully, recognized as a non-self."[32] The preference for allegory in de Man's writing thus takes on a moral significance as an honest, though painful, recognition of the disconnectedness of things, the temporal reality of discontinuity, change, and death in the human world, what de Man calls "the fallen world of our facticity."[33] Ironically, then, despite the claim that language cannot coincide with the phenomenal world of our daily experience, the language of de Man's deconstructive argument for the "authenticity" of allegory insists on the truth of its own claim, a truth claim made on the grounds that the negative knowledge it announces, the very impossibility of coincidence between sign and meaning or language and reality, coincides with the actual human condition.

To the "authenticity" of allegory, however, one may raise the same kind of question de Man raised to the illusory identification of the symbol: How can allegory alone retain the status of authenticity when it is also a construct of language in language? How can the "negative knowledge" itself escape the figurality of language that would vitiate all other (positive?) claims to knowledge and truth? And finally, is time really "the originary constitutive category" that addresses the "facticity" of our world without itself being implicated by the metaphoricity of language that permeates the very process of imagining and conceptualizing time and temporal attributes? In responding to de Man's attack on the illusions of the symbol, Murray Krieger raises just such a question. "If the uncritical projection of spatial categories vitiates the authority of myth," Krieger asks, "does not the acceptance of the reality of temporal categories enslave us to history as facticity?" Instead of viewing spatiality as illusory and temporality as unquestionably real, Krieger maintains that "after all, the diachronic, no less than the synchronic, relates to, and can function only within, the arbitrary conventions of human creation; the temporal model is as much the linguist's construction as is the spatial model."[34] Indeed, time is accessible to the human mind through as much metaphorical mediation as space. Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* offers perhaps the most impressive instance in modern times for grasping the elusive relation of temporality to the presence of being, and instead of "treating time as a substance or entity," as Azade Seyhan observes, Heidegger in that work "invokes metaphors of motion and spatiality which suggest a flow where the self moves toward itself."[35] In fact, temporality can be imagined only through such metaphors be-

cause, as Seyhan reminds us with Errol E. Harris, "in the final analysis, if the nature of time is to be understood at all, such understanding can only be found in a structure or principle that accounts for time in and as a succession of change. Such accounts, to be sure, speak not of the essence of time but are representations or formal constructs."[36] De Man's essay is entitled "The Rhetoric of Temporality," and in it the notion of time is often conveyed through some spatial metaphors. Krieger cites some of these metaphors and argues that in speaking of temporal categories, de Man is "forced to resort to spatial language" and to use terms like "distance," "void," or even "space" itself, which "reminds us that even the metonymic consecutiveness of existence and of discourse (of existence *as* discourse?) may require borrowings from the spatial realm to express our metaphorical understanding of it."[37] If time is as much a linguistic and cultural construct as space, the claim to truth and authenticity for either one of them at the expense of the other has no real meaning other than a polemical one; and de Man's attack on the symbol in favor of the allegory should be understood precisely in such a way as an argument advanced for polemical purposes, for opening a new space for the critical discourse of deconstruction against the authority of romantic, symbolist, or modernist aesthetics.

The acceptance of the "authenticity" of allegory, of temporality as an unproblematic category—that is, a category cleared of the illusory metaphorical identification of the symbol—becomes especially suspicious when put in the context of German romanticism. The German romantics, as Seyhan tries to show at great lengths, were keenly aware of the difficulty of representation, that of the representation of time in particular. Friedrich Schlegel maintains that anything ineffable or unsayable can be represented only "allegorically" and that time, "which resists any form of direct representation, can only be understood or rather intuited as metamorphosis and metaphor." That is to say, the early German romantics already relate temporality to the allegorical mode of representation that acknowledges the gaps between things and language. "Romantic consciousness," Seyhan asserts, "is a consciousness of radical temporality, that is, a continuum of disjunctive moments."[38] Such a consciousness evidently recognizes the significance of allegory, and the German romantics, notably Schlegel and Novalis, gave much emphasis on allegory as the true form of poetry or poetic representation. "Allegory," says Seyhan in summarizing the German romantic view, "mediates in a temporal context between an elusive revelation of being and the sensible finitude of poetic representation, between unrepresentability and representability. It constitutes an empirical re-presentation of the world of experience in image."[39] Such a notion of allegory is remarkably close to de Man's insofar as it embodies a clear sense of language's

inability to represent the natural object or the absolute, as it marks discontinuity as the distinct nature of temporality, and as it takes the form of a finite fragment to point toward the infinite as something beyond language, something ultimately inaccessible and unrepresentable.

If allegory recognizes and reenacts language's inability to represent the substance of the world and our experience of it, is symbol really positioned on such an opposite site that it deceptively lays the claim to overcome that linguistic inability in its ambition to synthesize form and substance, signifier and the signified? To put the question differently, are we really in danger of taking the poetic illusion of symbolic unification for true representation of what is disjunctive and unrepresentable? To frame the question in such terms is of course already to anticipate an answer in the negative. The insanely credulous reading of the illusory signs of literary fiction has long been exposed to ridicule in literary fiction itself since *Don Quixote*, and despite all the claims to symbolic unification promoted by the romantic or symbolist aesthetics, the world seems never to have much of a problem in maintaining the distinction between empiric reality and literary fiction. Even when we momentarily let ourselves be fully occupied with the fictional world of a poetic creation and attend its symbolic illusions, the basic distinction between the real and the fictional is always present, so to speak, at the back of our mind. Taking Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" as an example, Krieger argues that not only are we conscious of the illusory nature of the structural unity created by a literary work, but "the poem may well remind us of those temporal and decentering metaphors which threaten each moment to undo (or at least to 'unmetaphor') those spatial configurations which we conspire with the poem to create."[40] The speaker in the Keats poem never quite forgets the forlorn world of human existence and quickly realizes that his momentary rendezvous with the mythic bird is nothing but a fantasy and illusion, that "fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do." That realization is, however, not quite the same as to claim that the poetic text deconstructs itself by revealing the persistence of temporality, because the final words in the Keats poem ("Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" "Do I wake or sleep?") set in motion a fundamental indeterminacy that refuses to settle on either the poet's fantasy or on the forlorn world as the absolute truth. The question at the end of the poem suggests, as Krieger argues, "that the final moment of demystification is not necessarily privileged as the only authentic reality."[41] The speaker in the Keats poem retains his unifying vision even when he recognizes that vision as illusory. By refusing to give his final approval either to the spatial metaphors that carry him, "on the viewless wings of Poesy," into a fictional world of beauty and consolation, or to his constant awareness of the inexorable pressures of time and the existence of

human suffering and death, he puts in question any claim to authenticity and knowledge, even the kind of negative knowledge de Man prefers. Keats's felicitous phrase, "a waking dream," contains the opposite sides of illusion and soberness, metaphoric extravagance and realistic cognition; in other words, the oxymoron contains elements of both the symbolic and the allegorical, of which the dialectic movement and interaction ought to teach us the possibility of dreaming and staying awake at the same time, the possibility of making fiction in language without confusing our fictional constructs with truth and reality.

Insofar as both symbol and allegory are linguistic devices and rhetorical tropes for making present what is absent in language, they are not diametrically opposed to one another but share the same problem of representing an object of intuition in a medium that simply has no relation with that object except in arbitrarily defined terms and conventions. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant makes a distinction between two types of representation: the schematic and the symbolic. "Schemata contain direct, symbols indirect, exhibitions of the concept," says Kant.[42] That is to say, the symbol, like allegory, points to something different from itself in an indirect relation of analogical approximation. Symbolic representations, Kant maintains, "express concepts not by means of a direct intuition but only according to an analogy with one, i.e., a transfer of our reflection on an object of intuition to an entirely different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond."[43] The difference of incompatibility between the concept and its sensible representation, as Seyhan observes, is part of Kant's legacy the German romantics inherited and later developed, but they came to see it as characteristic not just of the symbolic but of all representations. If Kant still thought it possible to directly express concepts and ideas in a transcendental schematicism, the romantics would consider that possibility as nothing but the philosopher's wishful thinking, as the manifestation of "philosophy's search for absolutes," its dream to overcome the inadequacy of language in a perfect representation.[44] Novalis clearly states that "On the confusion of the *symbol* with the symbolized, on their identification, on the belief in true and complete representation, and the relation of the picture to the original . . . rest all the superstitions and mistakes of all times, people and individuals." That insight, as Seyhan notes, "would only allow for indirect representation (Kantian symbolic representation) as legitimate representation."[45] In collapsing the distinction between the schematic and the symbolic, however, not only can the romantics argue, as Novalis did, that the schematic representation is, after all, as indirect as the symbolic one and thus not so different from allegory in its noncoincidence of sign and the referent, but they can also argue that symbolic representation can actually accomplish what Kant envisioned for the

transcendental schemata, namely, a direct and total coincidence of an object or a concept with its representation. It is precisely the latter argument that has been advanced in romantic aesthetics since Friedrich Schelling, and it is the claim to symbolic unification with its seductive illusion of total coincidence that de Man has undertaken to deconstruct.

In tracing the history of allegory and symbol as well as their polarization in the age of romanticism, Hans-Georg Gadamer observes that the romantic emphasis on the unity of appearance and meaning in the symbolic was meant to serve a polemical purpose, namely, "to justify aesthetic autonomy against the claims of the concept."[46] Quite different from the early romantic writers like Schlegel and Novalis, Schelling and Karl Wilhelm Solger maintained that all art is symbolic and that the meaning of the symbol is not something imposed from the outside but an inner unity of the symbol and the symbolized, a "*complete indifference*, so that the universal *is* wholly the particular, and the particular is at the same time wholly the universal." Such a notion of inner unity, says Gadamer, develops the religious form of the symbol as an instantaneous coincidence of the finite with the infinite and makes this form a basic concept universal to aesthetics: "A symbol is the coincidence of sensible appearance and suprasensible meaning, and this coincidence is, like the original significance of the Greek 'symbolon' and its continuance in the terminology of various religious denominations, not a subsequent co-ordination, as in the use of signs, but the union of two things that belong to each other."[47] Walter Benjamin also points out the religious source of the romantic concept of the symbol, that the "unity of the material and the transcendental object" assumed in the theological symbol is "distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence" and that the idea of "the unlimited immanence of the moral world in the world of beauty is derived from the theosophical aesthetics of the romantics."[48] And yet the secularized concept of the symbol was thought to be related to the free artistic creation of genius, while the concept of allegory was considered to be closely bound up with dogmatics, that is, with the whole tradition of Western culture from the Greek rationalization of their mythology to the Christian interpretation of the Bible and the reconciliation of the two. "With the breakup of this tradition," says Gadamer, "allegory too was finished. For the moment art freed itself from all dogmatic bonds and could be defined as the unconscious production of genius, allegory inevitably became aesthetically suspect."[49]

In contemporary literary theory, however, the symbol, which was for the romantics the means of liberation from the tradition of a cold and regimented classicism, now ironically but understandably becomes identified with the tradition of romanticism, against which allegory in its turn seeks to give expression to postmodernism as a new cultural break.

It is therefore important to understand the polarization of symbol and allegory in a historical context, to see it as the result of a strife for critical power and authority, so that we will not uncritically embrace the claims and pretensions of the one at the expense of the other. The historical perspective is crucial here. In her discussion of early German romanticism and Nietzsche, Seyhan criticizes de Man for immersing himself in rhetorical reading while ignoring the historical and ideological context of Nietzsche's works. "Reading rhetorically is more than a confirmation that rhetoric rests on slippery ground, that it has no fixed referent," she says. "Rhetorical analysis is not an idle or self-referential exercise in pure formality. On the contrary, such analysis endeavors to understand why the use of certain tropes and topoi at certain periods empowers texts."[50] The empowerment or canonization of texts is closely related to the use of tropes and topoi like symbol and allegory, to interpretive modes like allegoresis, and we must examine these textual and interpretive strategies in relation to their historical and ideological context before we can adequately understand the changing reputation of symbol and allegory and the claims made by the various contending critical theories from romantic aesthetics to its critique in the discourse of postmodernism.

When the romantic critics argue for the capability of the symbol to unify sign and the referent, Hegel, on the other hand, following Kant, still understands the symbolic as an indirect and inadequate representation. The symbolic is for him "a *mere search* for portrayal than a capacity for true presentation," in which "the Idea has not found the form even in itself and therefore remains struggling and striving after it."[51] In Hegel's ethnocentric view, such an inadequate representation is mainly limited to the art of the East, especially that of ancient Egypt, "the country of symbols," and exemplified by the huge stone Sphinx, which he calls "the symbol of the symbolic itself," from whose recumbent animal body the human spirit as its upper part struggles in vain to free itself.[52] In Hegel's interpretation, the Greek myth of Oedipus correctly answering the riddle of the Sphinx and thereby destroying the monster signifies the triumph of classical art over the unconscious Egyptian symbolism. The history of art is at the same time the history of the development of the absolute Idea, in which the symbolic form of art is necessarily superseded by the classical:

> The symbolic shape is imperfect because, (i) in it the Idea is presented to consciousness only as indeterminate or determinate *abstractly*, and (ii) for this reason the correspondence of meaning and shape is always defective and must itself remain purely abstract. The classical art-form clears up this double defect; it is the free and

adequate embodiment of the Idea in the shape peculiarly appropriate to the Idea itself in its essential nature.[53]

Hegel's disparagement of the symbolic, as Gadamer notes, is by no means typical of his time but is "running counter to the tendency of modern aesthetics, which (since Schelling) has sought to emphasize precisely the unity of appearance and meaning in the symbolic in order thereby to justify aesthetic autonomy against the claims of the concept."[54] In this quarrel of art and philosophy, Hegel is of course on the side of the latter, and his view on the defects of symbolic representation makes it clear that he is not the philosopher of the symbol as Norris would let us believe, for he definitely does not consider the symbolic as "the highest form of art, the most advanced stage that aesthetic consciousness can reach in its striving for a realm of unified knowledge and perception."[55] Rather, the symbolic is for Hegel the first or the most primitive form of art, and only the classical art of Greek antiquity exemplifies the perfect form, which, he states emphatically, "must not be taken in the purely *formal* sense of a correspondence between a content and its external configuration. . . . On the contrary, in classical art the peculiarity of the content consists in its being itself the concrete Idea."[56] In other words, the classical art has a perfectly lucid form in which the sensuous appearance is appropriate to the Idea itself, and the unity of form and substance is so complete that no disproportion of appearance and meaning is allowed to break the classical equilibrium. In the romantic form of art, which according to Hegel begins with medieval art of Christianity that brings God before the imagination as pure spirit, the perfect unification of the Idea and its sensuous manifestation in classical art is reverted, though in a higher form, back to "that difference and opposition of the two sides which in symbolic art remained unconquered."[57] But if symbolic art fails because of the deficiency of the Idea trapped in a deficient form, romantic art fails because the Idea has developed so far beyond the reach of any material shape and has achieved such perfection as pure spirituality that it can no longer be adequately represented in the sensuous medium of art. Art, thus declares Hegel as the exponent of philosophy, "is and remains for us a thing of the past"; it must humbly accept its position of inferiority before philosophy as "untrammelled *thinking*, . . . the highest form of inwardness."[58]

What is of concern here is not Hegel's claim for the superiority of philosophy or a refutation thereof to vindicate the value of art, for Hegel's narrative of the necessary development of the Idea as the absolute spirit has lost its persuasiveness even long before the radical 1960s. The point of reviewing Hegel's argument in the *Aesthetics* here is a more modest one, namely, to emphasize the plurality of the understanding of symbol

and allegory and to suggest their commensurability. Indeed, as Gadamer notes, Solger considers all Christian art as "allegorical," and in seeing symbolic representation as characterized by a disproportion of the sensory appearance of the symbol and the meaning beyond that appearance, "Hegel's use of the concept 'symbolic' (like Creuzer's) is still very close to this concept of the allegorical."[59] The early German romantics, notably Schlegel and Novalis, clearly see all representations, whether the Kantian schematic or the symbolic, as allegorical in the sense of employing a sensuous image to point toward something beyond its own sensuosity. Schlegel is still able to declare that all beauty is allegorical. The later polarization of symbol and allegory and the concurrent devaluation of the latter, as we have seen, result from the basic ideas in nineteenth-century romantic aesthetics, especially its claim to free and unconscious creation of genius, the free symbol-making activity of the mind. "But is that a sufficient foundation? Is not this symbol-making activity also in fact limited by the continued existence of a mythical, allegorical tradition?" Gadamer raises these questions to challenge the pretensions of a romantic concept of transcendence by way of the symbolic. "Once this is recognized," he continues, "the contrast between symbol and allegory again becomes relative, whereas the prejudice of the aesthetics of Erlebnis made it appear absolute."[60] Both symbol and allegory represent something other than the immediate sensuous appearance, and in that sense they are close to one another. The limitation of representation is made more than abundantly clear in the postmodern critique of romantic aesthetics, and with the hindsight of all these arguments and critiques, we can have a fresh look at symbol and allegory no longer as polarized tropes but in the complexity of their relation with regard to whatever they try to indicate, suggest, or imply in the act of representation.

University of California, Riverside
Riverside, California

NOTES

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54. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 78–79.
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57. Ibid., 1:79.
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